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ABSTRACT

This article, the second in a continuing series highlighting exemplary information technology (IT) practices, recounts an interview with the project manager of New York State's Child Nutrition Management System (CNMS). CNMS is a Web-based system for claim processing and program management for the Child Nutrition Program administered by the New York State Education Department. CNMS is the first Web-based local assistance claim system in New York State government that provides seamless processing of payments, beginning with online data entry and culminating in direct deposit of funds to local agency accounts. The interview addresses development of the system, including obstacles and successes. (EV)

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Child Nutrition Management System: An Interview with Rich Connell.

Gregory M. Benson, Editor

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Innovations in information resource management to support government

Child Nutrition Management System: An interview with Rich Connell

Consistent with the desire expressed by The Forum membership to have greater depth of information related to "IT best practices" in the e-Government arena, this article is the second in a continuing series designed to provide members with a greater understanding of the organizational context, barriers and measures of success related to IT practices that have been recognized as exemplary. It is intended that this enhanced understanding will enable others to consider replication or adaptation of this and similar practices, thereby reducing overall development costs and time to completion.

The Child Nutrition Management System (CNMS) is a Web-based system for claim processing and program management for the Child Nutrition Program, administered by the NYS Education Department. CNMS is the *first* Web-based local assistance claim system in New York State government that provides seamless processing of payments beginning with online data entry and culminating in direct deposit of funds to local agency accounts. The construction of CNMS took 33 months from the initial planning phases in March, 1998 through process modeling, design, development and production. Piloting began in November, 2000 with full production commencing in January, 2001. CNMS is a NYSFIRM 2001 Best Practices Award recipient in the management category.

Question: **What prompted you to undertake this project?**

Answer: The Child Nutrition Program provides federal and state reimbursement for meals in over 6,000 schools and residential child care facilities. Prior to CNMS, monthly claims were entered into a 25 year-old mainframe system that had been patched repeatedly over the years and was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain and modify. It was a paper-intensive, inefficient process. Before deciding on our approach to replacing the legacy system, we conducted a survey of other state systems and found that a number of states were constructing or had implemented

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Web-based CN applications. Our follow-up conversations and meetings with these states convinced us that Web was the way to go.

Question: **Building a transactional system that is used by external customers must require extensive collaboration. Who did you involve in this process?**

Answer: CNMS required collaboration with a broad range of federal, state and local public and private agencies. NYSED program, finance and IT staff formed the core in-house team, while consultants from the Oracle Corporation served as mentors throughout the project. In terms of external customers, we established a user group representing a cross-section of public and private schools that provided input on data requirements and system design and navigation. We had to work with the State Comptroller's Office in constructing the payment interface and the Office of General Services in designing a module for the surplus food program. We also had to ensure that our report products satisfied the data needs of the many agencies that use CN information including the US Department of Agriculture, the Census Bureau, numerous grantor agencies and advocacy groups such as the Nutrition Consortium.

Question: **Why did you decide to use a mentoring approach to application development?**

Answer: In government today, there is a critical shortage of IT staff with the skill-sets required to build applications like CNMS. And given the demand, it's nearly impossible to recruit these people at entry level salaries. So the solution is either you outsource application development and maintenance, which is expensive and not always effective or you train in-house staff. We opted for on-the-job training or mentoring of our IT staff, which we coupled with over eight weeks of classroom training. We now have highly skilled developers that can maintain, enhance and update the system in response to changing business rules. And they can serve as mentors to other IT staff...they become the seed for knowledge transfer within the agency.

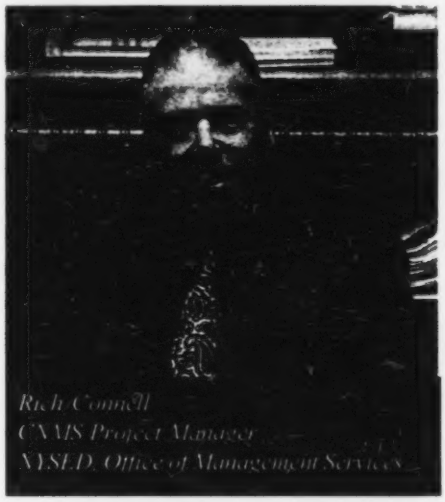
Question: **What kind of training did you provide for your users?**

Answer: A month prior to production, we conducted orientation sessions around the State – not extensive training, but merely an introduction to the system. If a Web-application is well designed, the navigation should be fairly intuitive. At the same time, we gave our users access to a demo Website and database so they could practice and get comfortable with the system before going live. Also, each page on CNMS has detailed help text. And, we have a dedicated help phone line where our users are directed to program, finance or technical support. We opted to have the technical questions answered by our IT development team rather than a generic help desk, which turned out to be a good decision. It has provided valuable feedback and is highly informative in disclosing factors affecting system performance.

Question: **Are the schools required to submit claims on-line?**

Answer: No. Some schools do not have Web access and others are reluctant to use the Web. However, paper claims are processed on CNMS, as well. The Child Nutrition Reimbursement Unit has CNMS access that allows it to enter or revise claims for any local agency. In the meantime, we promote CNMS to our paper customers at every opportunity.

Question: **What are some of the obstacles you faced?**



Rich Connell
CNMS Project Manager
NYSED, Office of Management Services

Answer: Application construction begins with business re-engineering. You can have the latest, cutting edge technology, but if your business rules and processes are illogical and inefficient, your system will suffer or fail. Getting people to critically analyze and refine their operations and data requirements can be very difficult. From a technical standpoint, CNMS also presented a major challenge. There are plenty of government e-commerce applications where you can pay for something over the Web. However, that's basically shopping cart functionality, which is a lot different than entering data and having New York State send you money. Consequently, CNMS contains thousands of edits, constraints and internal controls to safeguard transactions. Moving to a Web-based system also necessitates change in the work culture. People don't want to relinquish paper. Job duties change. How do we fully use the system to improve our management of a program? Adapting to a new work culture is certainly one of the biggest challenges.

Question: **How do you measure the success of CNMS?**

Answer: In a sense, that's pretty easy...customer usage. Almost 80% of all claims are now filed online.

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Since January, over $450 million in payments have been processed through CNMS. In the past, claim processing took from a month to six weeks or more. Today, you can go online, enter a claim, get immediate validation and have direct deposit in four business days. But that's only part of the picture. CNMS should ultimately be a tool for managing programs, both at the State and local level. Lunch and breakfast programs in the schools are businesses and school food service managers need readily available, accurate programmatic and financial information to operate efficiently. And State level managers need a wide array of report products and query modules to target and improve monitoring and technical assistance. If we provide that, we are truly successful.

Question: **What are some of the factors that contributed to the success of the CNMS project?**

Answer: Detailed business process modeling provides the foundation for good system design. Extensive joint application development or JAD sessions involving NYSED program, finance and IT staff and Oracle consultants were used to document the business rules and model the data requirements. The time and effort invested in the JAD sessions paid off in a system model that required little change over the course of the project. Allocation of IT resources was certainly a critical factor. Two IT developers worked full-time with our Oracle consultants throughout the project. And our database administration unit, network staff and other developers provided continual support. Project management was a shared responsibility of Oracle and NYSED. Tasks were prioritized, scheduled and monitored on a weekly basis. Risks were identified and documented and issues and conflicts were quickly resolved. But perhaps more than anything, we were fortunate to have an extremely talented and dedicated team that maintained its resolve over the three-year duration of the project.

Question: **What further system enhancements do you have planned?**

Answer: We will soon be upgrading to newer versions of the database and Oracle design tools. We are also nearing completion of a companion data warehouse that will greatly improve reporting capabilities. We will be expanding our auto-generated e-mails to confirm transactions; and there is continued refinement of existing modules and creation of new management modules. The more you use the system, the more possibilities you see.

Rich Connell has been the CNMS Project Manager at the NYSED Office of Management Services since inception in 1998. Prior to CNMS, Rich managed the Grants Finance Office at NYSED where he initiated a major reengineering of the grant business processes.